

# ***The Los Angeles Times***

## **Lockyer Warns of Firms Posing as Legal Aid Services**

Jocelyn Y. Stewart

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State Atty. Gen. Bill Lockyer is warning Californians to beware of businesses that advertise "legal aid" or "legal services," only to provide costly and shoddy services that may hurt clients in court.

The warning, in a recently released consumer alert, is a reaction to businesses that prey on the public's trust in legitimate legal aid organizations.

"The true nonprofit legal services organizations in California provide indispensable free legal assistance to consumers who can't afford to hire an attorney but need help while facing dangerous domestic violence situations, evictions from their homes and other emergencies," Lockyer said in the alert.

Legal aid services are nonprofit, publicly funded organizations that provide services to low-income clients at no charge or for a minimal fee. Certain court forms refer the poor to legal aid.

But some businesses, staffed by people who are not attorneys, have adopted "legal aid" or similar names, leading some people to believe that they are nonprofits.

In Los Angeles, many of the victims ended up at the office of the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, a legitimate nonprofit organization.

Elena Popp, executive director of the foundation, welcomed the attorney general's alert.

"It is actually very painful for us to see people come into this office having paid \$400, \$500, \$600 to someone to prepare paperwork that is badly done," said Popp. "So they've been ripped off once by having to pay this fee and then in court by losing their case."

In May, the attorney general's office filed a friend of the court brief in support of four Shasta County residents who won a case against Modesto resident Walter Moore, who also used the name Jeff Simmons.

The four plaintiffs, all of whom were facing eviction, said they were deceived into calling Moore by his use of the term "legal aid" in advertising.

"Here we have a profit-seeking businessman who's not a lawyer calling himself 'Legal Aid' in the Yellow Pages and on the Internet," said Gary Rhoades, litigation director for the Housing Rights Center, and lead attorney on the case.

Moore operated a business offering several types of legal services through advertisements that appeared in cities throughout the state.

During the trial, former Moore employees said they had been trained to tell callers they were the same "legal aid" mentioned in court forms. Moore's business charged \$85 to \$400 to type simple forms, Rhoades said.

The jury found Moore guilty of violating the Unlawful Detainer Assistance Act and of practicing law without a license and acting with fraud, malice, or oppression.

The judge determined that Moore had violated California's Unfair Business Practices and False Advertising Laws. In February 2001, the judge ordered Moore to pay restitution and issued a statewide injunction prohibiting Moore and his associates from using the term "legal aid" and similar names. The court ordered Moore to advertise the verdict in newspapers in 22 cities.

The case is on appeal.

To verify that a legal aid organization is federally funded or to find a local nonprofit legal aid office, consumers may refer to the Legal Services Corp.'s Web site, [www.lsc.gov/fundprog.htm](http://www.lsc.gov/fundprog.htm).

Those who have been victimized by document preparers who are not attorneys should call their local district attorney or the Attorney General's Public Inquiry Unit at (800) 952-5225. Complaints may be filed online at <http://www.ag.ca.gov/consumers>.

Those in need of assistance may call the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles at (800) 399-4529